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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to begin exploration of the "class clown" phenomenon. Eighth grade students identified as class clowns on the basis of multiple peer nominations were compared to a random sample of classmates on: inferred and professed self-concept, school attitude, social status, and classroom behavior. Various demographic data were also contrasted. Two distinct clown behavioral types emerged from an analysis of the collected sociometric data. These types are discussed, and it is suggested that they are the result of important personality characteristics not isolated by the initial analysis of data. (Author/SJL)

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# THE CLASS CLOWN PHENOMENON AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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# THE CLASS CLOWN PHENOMENON AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS*

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The purpose of this study was to begin exploration of the "class clown" phenomenon. Eighth grade students identified as class clowns on the basis of multiple peer nominations were compared to a random sample of classmates on: inferred and professed self concept, school attitude, social status, and classroom behavior. Various demographic data were also contrasted.

Historically the study of humor has not attracted the serious interest of behavioral scientists. Martineau (1972, p. 102) resported that "...as of 1972 there were approximately a score of journal articles scattered over 30 years, a few directly pertinent dissertations and several books and monographs which refer to humor at some point but do not examine it in any comprehensive manner." There is some evidence, though, that the educational importance of humor, like play, is slowly being recognized (Chapman, 1973; Groch, 1974; McGhee, 1971; & Terry, 1975). However, none of the located educational studies focused upon the characteristics of the individual initiating the comic situation. A recent computer search of ERIC and Psychological Abstracts confirmed this; they contained not a single reference to class clowns. Mention of class clowns in the sociological and psychological literature is rare, and generally occurs in listings of various student roles or as a parenthetical comment in works directed toward other topics. Thus, virtually nothing is known about one of the most commonly recognized student roles: that of class clown.

From the little work on humor done to date enough has been learned to warrent further exploration in educational settings. Humor occurs in nearly all human interaction and is one of the processes affecting the functioning of social systems. The identified functions of humor are varied: it is a means of social control by expressing approval or disapproval of group behavior (Myrdal, 1944; Stephenson, 1951), it leads to social cohesion (Blau, 1955; Middleton & Moland, 1959), it releases tension by providing a mechanism for communicating sentiments which would be difficult to voice in any other way (Goodrich, Henry, & Goodrich, 1954), and it can introduce competion and social conflict (Pitchford, 1960).

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The content of humor can be classified as either clowning/whimsical or sarcastic/biting (Goodchilds, 1972; O'Connell, 1969). The first of these is viewed as a process which keeps interaction moving freely and smoothly, while sarcastic humor can lead to interpersonal friction (Martineau, 1972).

O'Connell (1969) studied humor of "developmental groups" among neuropsychiatric patients in a VA hospital. Those identified by group members as "funny" wits were regarded as influential leaders, popular, active, and independent. "Sarcastic" wits were seen as hostile, less influential, and not as popular as those viewed as funny.

Additional characteristics have been identified of individuals who create laughter in social situations. Goodchilds (1959) studied seven small, mixed-sex groups of corporation supervisory personnel who were participating in a five-day management development course. On postcourse self-ratings wits of both sexes, compared to non-wits, gave more positive personality profiles and saw themselves as having participated more actively in their groups and in more different ways. In describing each other, members agreed with the wits' favorable self-descriptions. Men were found to make more jokes than women and were the only ones to make sarcastically toned jokes. In experimental situations (Goodchilds & Green, 1971; Ziller, Behtinger, & Goodchilds, 1962) the individual who is witty has been found to be creative, have positive self perceptions, to be an active group member, and to be seen as helpful by other group members.

In summary, individuals who make others laugh have been described as being influential leaders, popular, active, independent, creative, and to have positive self perceptions. The humor they create plays an important role in social system maintenance. Thus, exploration of humor and those who generate it should be extended to educational settings.

It has been aptly observed that our great professional comedians are frequently our most perceptive social commentators. Perhaps the same may be true of our class clowns. Research directed at this group may provide valuable insights into the process of schooling.

## Methods

### Subjects:

Subjects were selected from 47 eighth grade classrooms in eleven Florida middle schools. Data were collected on 134 students identified by classmates as class clowns and on a random sample of 380 non-clowns within each of the rooms. Participation by teachers was voluntary.

### Procedures:

Because this study was funded by the Florida Educational Research and Development Council (FERDC), letters of invitation to participate in the project were mailed to the 35 county FERDC representatives. The representatives returned names of eighth grade teachers who expressed an interest in receiving additional information concerning participation. Teachers expressing interest received a detailed description of the project and a form on which to indicate their desire to participate and to indicate number of students who would be involved. Only one teacher declined to participate.

Data collection was in three phases. Phase I asked every student in the 47 participating classrooms to nominate classmates to five sociometric positions:

1. Most classrooms have a few students who joke a lot and who make others in the room laugh. These are the "Class Clowns". Please list below the names (first and last) of students you know who clown around a lot.

2. Name the students who are your best friends.

3. Name the students who usually come up with the best ideas for class projects or activities.

4. If you had to work on a group project in English with three other students, and half your grade depended upon this project, which three students would you select to work with?

5. List the students that you think are liked by almost everyone in the class.

Phase I sociometric forms were returned to the research team and nominations tabulated. Students receiving ten or more peer nominations were identified as class clowns.

Many students received two to four nominations as clowns, probably from close friends. There was then a clear break followed by a small percentage of students receiving ten or more nominations; a very few students were overwhelmingly selected by classmates (and frequently students from other classes within the same school) as clowns. These students, on whom there were high levels of consensus, were designated super clowns.

For Phase II, teachers were given a packet of questionnaires to complete on the class clowns and the random sample of non-clowns. This packet contained two instruments, the Florida Key and the Classroom Behavior Inventory.

The Florida Key is a measure of self concept as learner. It consists of 18 behaviors to which teachers respond on a scale of 1 to 5. In addition to total score, the Key yields four factor scores: Relating, Asserting, Investing, and Coping. A split-halves estimate of reliability of total score has been reported to be .93; all validation correlations were significant at the .01 level (Purkey, Cage, & Graves, 1973).

The Classroom Behavior Inventory was developed by staff at the National Institute of Mental Health. Five subscales were selected for use in this study based upon hypothesized behavior differences between clowns and non-clowns (Unruliness, Attention Seeking, Leadership, Kindness, & Cheerfulness). Scale reliabilities, as estimated by Kuder-Richardson formula 20, ranged from .73 to .96; the median internal consistency scale reliability was .86 (Schaefer, Aaronson, & Burgoon, 1966).

During Phase II all students within the 47 classrooms completed the Student Attitude Scale (Damico, Hines, & Northrop, 1975) and a shortened form of Coopersmith's Self Esteem Inventory (SEI) (Coopersmith, 1967; Northrop, 1974). The attitude scale has a reliability ranging from .88 to .94 and the short form of the SEI of .86. Students also completed a form of the Classroom Behavior Inventory modified so that they reported their own perceptions of the behavior of class clowns. Additionally, students provided information on number and ages of siblings, and number and types of extracurricular activities. Only those instruments completed by class clowns and the random sample were included in the study.

Phase III of the project, now in progress, involves classroom observation and interviewing of class clowns and super clowns.

## Results

The amount of time involved in having teachers collect data from their students in two phases has resulted, at the present time, in having sociometric data available on a larger sample than questionnaire data. Sociometric data have been processed on 1668 students in eleven middle schools. From among these students, 134 class clowns were identified by peer nominations and 380 students were randomly selected as a contrast group. Among the 134 class clowns, 14 were identified as super clowns -- those students receiving over 25 nominations as clowns.

Questionnaire data are reported here on 204 students -- 54 clowns (9 superclowns) and 150 non-clowns. Data on the remaining student population are still being processed.

Table 1 reports the frequency by which students were nominated by peers as class clowns. The mean number of nominations received by this population was 16.18.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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A number of chi-square tables were computed to examine differences between the clowns and randomly selected non-clowns on race, sex, total number of brothers and sisters, number of older brothers and sisters, number of younger brothers and sisters, and number of extracurricular activities. Only one of these calculations was significant: sex. There were significantly fewer female clowns than would be expected given the number of females in the population.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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A second series of chi-square tables were computed for the same set of variables but contrasting super clowns (those receiving 25 or more peer nominations) to all other students. Again, only one difference was significant. Table 3 indicates that the super

clowns did not have as many older siblings as the comparison group. Super clowns tend to be the elder or only child in their families.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Questionnaire data supplied by teachers and students were analyzed using a 2x2x2 factorial design. This procedure was used to examine differences between clowns and non-clowns by race and sex. The same procedure was used to contrast super clowns to all other students. Because of limited space, tables are provided only where there were significant main effects for clowns or super clowns. There were no significant two- or three-way interactions.

There were no significant differences between clowns and non-clowns on the measure of inferred learner self concept. The only significant difference on the Florida Key was by race. White students had a mean of 60.49 while the mean for Black students was 50.97. This difference was significant at the .01 level.

Clowns did, however, differ from other students on three of the five subscales of the Classroom Behavior Inventory. Clowns, as contrasted to other students, were seen by their teachers as unruly (means: clowns = 15.15; non-clowns = 11.06), overtly

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Insert Tables 4, 5, and 6 about here

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seeking attention (means: clowns = 14.19; non-clowns = 9.82), and possessing high levels of leadership (means: clowns- 12.74; non-clowns = 11.45). Clowns were described by teachers as being as kind and cheerful as other students within their classes.

Student perceptions of the classroom behavior of clowns did not differ when reported by clowns or non-clowns.

There were no significant differences between clowns and non-clowns on school attitude or self esteem. White students

had a significantly more positive attitude toward school ( $p < .05$) than did Black students (means: white students = 128.71; Black students = 121.58). There were no significant differences by race or sex on self esteem.

The only significant difference between the super clowns and other students was on Attention Seeking. On this variable super clowns had a mean of 14.78 while all other students had a mean of 10.81.

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Insert Table 7 about here

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The sociometric nominations of 55 clowns to three classroom roles are reported in Table 8. These nominations were made by 806 students in five middle schools. (These schools were selected for analysis because all eighth grade teachers and students participated.) Nine of the clowns received no nominations to any of

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Insert Table 8 about here

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these three sociometric positions: "Students Who Come Up with Best Ideas for Class Projects", "Work on an Important Group Project", or "Liked by Almost Everyone in the Class". Clowns received more nominations to "Liked by Most Students" than to either of the other sociometric positions.

## Discussion

This first stage report on the class clown phenomenon raised more questions than it answered. For example, why is there a disproportionate number of male clowns, and why is female clowning behavior most prevelant in a single middle school? Are there at least two distinct behavioral types of class clowns, as this preliminary study indicates? These questions will be considered in light of present findings.

Regarding race of clowns, the investigators anticipated that there would be a disproportionate number of Black clowns because of the large number of famous, Black comedians who might serve as role models (i.e., Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson, Redd Foxx, Dick Gregory, etc.). This was not the case. There were only as many Black clowns as expected given the racial composition of the student population. This raises doubts that Black comedians are serving as prominent role models for Black students.

A second assumption of the investigators, prior to the research, was that relatively few female clowns would be nominated. This was the case. Only 16 out of 134 clowns were female. Only one of nine super clowns was female. A possible reason for the small number of female clowns is that clowning behavior among females has traditionally been discouraged as being "unladylike." This view may be changing. Planned future research will attempt to detect changing trends in female clowning behavior. An interesting sidelight of this study is that seven of the nine identified female clowns came from the same middle school. What social and psychological processes are encouraging female clowning in this particular school?

Two distinct clown behavioral types emerged from an analysis of the collected sociometric data. The first type was the popular, group leader clown. The second type was an isolate. The popular-type clown was seen by classmates as being "creative", "academically capable", and "well liked." The isolate-type clown was not selected by classmates as fitting any of these roles. Observation of eighth grade team, supplemented by teachers and students interviews, provides some clues on why certain clowns were isolates. Isolate-clowns caused laughter at the expense of others. Within a brief period of time, isolate-clowns were observed to dump a girl out of her chair, pop a paper bag beside the ear of a boy, flick a pencil across a table at a student, and to make fun of another student's clothing. Interviews with teachers confirmed that these behaviors were common of the behavior patterns of clowns identified as isolates. It seems likely that the difference in class clown behavioral types is masking important personality characteristics of clowns not indicated by the initial analysis of data. In this initial study, all students classified as class clowns were grouped together. In future researches, efforts will be made by these investigators to more closely analyze clown types.

*There are three things which are real: God, human folly, and laughter. Since the first two pass our comprehension, we must do what we can with the third.*

*Aubrey Menen*
*The Ramayana*

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Table 1

Frequency of Sociometric Nominations as a Class Clown by Peers

| Frequency of Nomination | Number of Ss Nominated |
|---|---|
| 10 - 12 | 46 |
| 13 - 15 | 25 |
| 16 - 18 | 17 |
| 19 - 21 | 12 |
| 22 - 24 | 11 |
| 25 - 27 | 9 |
| 28 - 30 | 6 |
| 31 - 33 | 1 |
| 34 - 36 | 1 |
| 37 - 39 | 0 |
| 40+ | 2 |

N= 130
$\bar{X}$= 16.18

Table 2

Distribution of Sample Population by Clown/Non-Clown and Sex

| Sex | Clowns | Non-Clowns |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 43 | 61 |
| Female | 11 | 84 |

$x^2$= 20.77, df= 1, $p < .001$
n = 199

Table 3

Distribution of Sample Populations by
Super Clown/All Other Students and
Number of Older Brothers & Sisters

| Number of Older Brothers & Sisters | Super Clowns | All Other Students |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | 3 | 61 |
| 1 | 2 | 37 |
| 2 | 1 | 26 |
| 3 | 1 | 26 |
| 4 | 1 | 22 |
| 5 | 0 | 11 |
| 6 | 0 | 3 |
| 7 | 0 | 5 |
| 8 | 0 | 4 |
| 9 | 1 | 0 |

$x^2 = 22.85$, df= 9, $p < .01$

Table 4

Analysis of Variance -- Classroom Behavior Inventory: Unruliness Clowns

| Source | SS | df | MS | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Main Effects | 696.842 | 3 | 232.281 | 11.884*** |
| Clown | 440.132 | 1 | 440.132 | 22.519*** |
| Sex | 54.848 | 1 | 54.848 | 2.806 |
| Race | 11.227 | 1 | 11.227 | .574 |
| 2-Way Interactions | 9.267 | 3 | 3.089 | .158 |
| Clown/Sex | 4.718 | 1 | 4.718 | .241 |
| Clown/Race | .751 | 1 | .751 | .038 |
| Sex/Race | 4.706 | 1 | 4.706 | .241 |
| 3-Way Interacions | 25.837 | 1 | 25.837 | 1.322 |
| Clown/Sex/Race | 25.837 | 1 | 25.837 | 1.322 |
| Explained | 731.945 | 7 | 104.564 | 5.350*** |
| Residual | 3,479.043 | 178 | 19.545 | |
| Total | 4,210.988 | 185 | 22.762 | |

*** $p < .001$

Table 5

Analysis of Variance -- Classroom Behavior Inventory: Attention Seeking Clowns

| Source | SS | df | MS | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Main Effects | 760.905 | 3 | 253.635 | 13.427*** |
| Clown | 546.986 | 1 | 546.986 | 28.956*** |
| Sex | 25.946 | 1 | 25.946 | 1.373 |
| Race | 19.675 | 1 | 19.675 | 1.042 |
| 2-Way Interactions | 25.806 | 3 | 8.602 | .455 |
| Clown/Sex | 8.010 | 1 | 8.010 | .424 |
| Clown/Race | 14.711 | 1 | 14.711 | .779 |
| Sex/Race | 2.984 | 1 | 2.984 | .158 |
| 3-Way Interactions | 44.711 | 1 | 44.711 | 2.367 |
| Clown/Sex/Race | 44.711 | 1 | 44.711 | 2.367 |
| Explained | 831.422 | 7 | 118.775 | 6.288*** |
| Residual | 3,362.457 | 178 | 18.890 | |
| Total | 4,193.879 | 185 | 22.670 | |

*** $p < .001$

Table 6

Analysis of Variance --
Classroom Behavior Inventory: Leadership
Clowns

| Source | SS | df | MS | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Main Effects | 202.893 | 3 | 67.631 | 4.599** |
| Clown | 127.511 | 1 | 127.511 | 8.672** |
| Sex | 137.482 | 1 | 137.482 | 9.350** |
| Race | 7.345 | 1 | 7.345 | .500 |
| 2-Way Interactions | 47.310 | 3 | 15.770 | 1.073 |
| Clown/Sex | 28.752 | 1 | 28.752 | 1.955 |
| Clown/Race | 3.117 | 1 | 3.117 | .212 |
| Sex/Race | 13.839 | 1 | 13.839 | .941 |
| 3-Way Interactions | 4.240 | 1 | 4.240 | .288 |
| Clown/Sex/Race | 4.240 | 1 | 4.240 | .288 |
| Explained | 254.444 | 7 | 36.349 | 2.472* |
| Residual | 2,617.320 | 178 | 14.704 | |
| Total | 2,871.764 | 185 | 15.523 | |

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

Table 7

Analysis of Variance— Classroom Behavior Inventory: Attention Seeking Super Clowns

| Source | SS | df | MS | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Main Effects | 296.161 | 3 | 98.720 | 4.625** |
| Super Clown | 82.241 | 1 | 82.241 | 3.853* |
| Sex | 157.696 | 1 | 157.696 | 7.387** |
| Race | 9.185 | 1 | 9.185 | .430 |
| 2-Way Interactions | 76.721 | 3 | 25.574 | 1.198 |
| Super clown/Sex | 18.809 | 1 | 18.809 | .881 |
| Super clown/Race | 33.836 | 1 | 33.836 | 1.585 |
| Sex/Race | 49.853 | 1 | 49.853 | 2.335 |
| Explained | 372.881 | 6 | 62.147 | 2.911** |
| Residual | 3,820.998 | 179 | 21.346 | |
| Total | 4,193.879 | 185 | 22.670 | |

* p .05
** p .01

Table 8

Sociometric Nominations of Class Clowns
By Classmates

| Frequency of Nomination | Best Ideas | To Work on Class Project | Liked By Most Students |
|---|---|---|---|
| None | 21 | 17 | 14 |
| 1-3 | 24 | 27 | 18 |
| 4-6 | 5 | 8 | 10 |
| 7-9 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| 10-12 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| 13-15 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 16-18 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 19-21 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 22-24 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 25-27 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 28-30 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| N= | 55 | 55 | 55 |
| X= | 2.49 | 2.20 | 4.94 |